Historical Society of Palm Desert

P.O. Box 77
Palm Desert, CA 92261
(760) 346-6588

The Hourglass

Community
Service
Collections
Archives

SUMMER 2007 VOL. 14, NO. 2

RANDALL HENDERSON
"Mr. Desert"

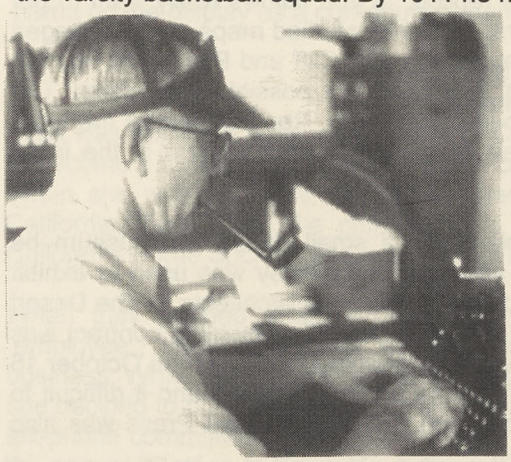
From *Desert Editor* by J. Wilson McKenney

The lives of the children of Nelson Rankin Henderson, a Scotch-Presbyterian druggist, and Mary Catherine Henderson, a Quaker homemaker, were integral to the early history of Palm Desert. The five siblings came together to use their individual talents to form a viable community on virgin desert terrain.

This is the story of the eldest boy in the family, who was born on April 12, 1988 in Clarinda, Iowa. His was a middle-class family, and he was an average student in the elementary school he attended in Shenandoah, Iowa. Randall thoroughly enjoyed hiking, horseback riding, sports, and learning to play the mandolin. After school hours were occupied with working for the Henry Field Seed Company, spending summers in the vegetable gardens and winters in the mail order house. After high school, he kept his job in order to earn money for college expenses.

In April 1907 at 18 years of age, Randall headed west by the cheapest means of transportation ... one of the railroad's empty cattle cars. The scenery visible through the slatted sides of the car was his introduction to desert lands rimmed by mountains. During the summer he took a job with Buckingham & Hecht Shoe Company in San Francisco, and in September he moved to Los Angeles and entered the University of Southern California.

To keep himself solvent while getting his education, Randall waited tables, washed dishes, painted houses, and was a part-time sports reporter for the Los Angeles Times. The latter was probably the most significant position he held in preparation for future employment. Other collegiate activities included holding the school's welterweight wrestling championship for two years, being student body president during his senior year, and being captain of the varsity basketball squad. By 1911 he had his Bachelor's Degree and was ready to face the world.



At Parker, Arizona on the Colorado River, Randall briefly worked as a surveyor's helper. Then he became a printer's apprentice at the Parker Post, a weekly, earning $ .25 per hour. The newspaper offered jack-of-all-trades experience in the business. Randall wrote news, solicited advertising, operated the type-setting machine, and did presswork.

Vera Riopel was on Randall's mind, so it wasn't long before he returned to Los Angeles to get married. She was the daughter of the man who had hired him to paint houses while attending the university. After the wedding they set up housekeeping in a small place in Parker. They had two children, Evonne and Randall Jr.

The newspaper sent Randall to Blythe to handle news and advertising for subscribers in that area. Within months, Randall partnered with Myron Watson. They set up their own print shop and started publishing the Blythe Herald. In 1918 Randall left to train as a pilot to fly in World War I. Upon returning at the end of the war, he resumed editorship of the paper. Henderson and Watson bought the daily Calexico Chronicle in 1922, and hired the young J. Wilson McKenney as front office apprentice. Eleven years later Henderson took McKenney on as his partner.

Randall loved the written word and could rise to eloquence on his subject, which was evident in his Desert Magazine articles. Being an introvert, he was not always an easy person to know and in his relationships he was sometimes uncompromising and severe, or at other times he was courteous and friendly. When speaking on humanitarian principles in a formal setting he might be inarticulate, but when sitting around a camp fire with

friends his speech was precise and colorful. Normally undemonstrative, his face could vividly reflect joy or anger. Randall didn't drink, ate simply, and smoked but hated the habit. His love of open spaces and solitude, desert and mountains, often led him to invite a friend or two to hike and camp and enjoy the environment with him.

"Desert Magazine" was founded in 1937 in El Centro. Randall was determined to keep the magazine desert-related, which resulted in having to reject submissions which veered away from his chosen topic. Though the publication was a gem in its category, it was years before it became a money-making project. Its subscribers were loyal because the magazine informed, inspired, and encouraged readers in things related to the desert. No longer did they consider the desert an arid, lonely expanse ... but a vacation destination that offered treasures to those who would seek them out. The first issue of Desert Magazine was dated November 1937. By that time there were 618 subscribers, but they printed 7000 copies in order to increase circulation and attract advertisers. Randall also purchased the Elite Printing Company which had been established in El Centro. When the partners decided to dissolve their contract, Tazewell Lamb and Bess Stacy bought McKenney's interest in the publication. The magazine finally showed a small profit in August 1941.

Early in 1943 Randall went back into active duty for World War II. He was stationed in Africa, where he had time to think about relocating his publishing plant which had definitely outgrown the El Centro location. He was not very enthused about a Tuscon site which had been suggested to him; he favored the Coachella Valley. He briefly discussed his thoughts with his brother, Cliff, who was also serving in Africa at the time. Evonne Riddell, his daughter, was working for him, and Rand, his son, was killed in the battle at Saipan in 1944. At the age of 56 he was determined to throw himself completely into his work when he was discharged on October 20, 1944.

Upon his return to civilian life, he found that his competent staff had built up a sizeable bank balance for him. A month later he committed to buying 160 acres from the Henry Jerome Toy estate at $60 an acre. While he was waiting for confirmation from his Indio realtor, he wrote to the Mollin Investment Company of Los Angeles which was selling home sites in Palm Village. In the letter Randall noted that he would put $150,000 into a publishing plant and landscape, and he made a 4-point proposal from the company he requested: title to 30 acres for Desert Magazine, a water supply and reasonable rates, erection and equipping a post office, and securing a site for an outdoor desert bowl. He also listed benefits to local land owners: a job-producing plant, assurance of a post office, services to bring visitors, and local cultural prestige. Randall didn't send the letter but called his brothers, Cliff and Phil, in Los Angeles.

He drove to the Pan-Pacific Auditorium and read the letter to his two brothers. According to Randall's files, Cliff asked, "Would you make the same proposal to Phil and me?" Randall replied, "If you fellows really want to get into the real estate business, I'll make you a better proposal." For several days they studied maps and exchanged information by phone. In November 1944 the three brothers met in the desert cove. Cliff and Phil would buy the 160-acre Lewis property, and they asked Randall to obtain options on 1620 acres for possible subdivision. The bothers kept in close touch and met occasionally. In naming the proposed town site, Randall wanted the word "Desert" used, and Phil said, "Why not call it Palm Desert?" All three agreed. After involvement in the initial building projects in the cove, Phil died August 1, 1946 in Los Angeles.

In a letter to Randall dated February 1945, Cliff suggested that plans for a small desert art museum be incorporated into his building plans. This idea materialized when the spacious outer lobby was used to exhibit paintings by local artists. Harry Williams and his two sons, Stewart and Roger, were the architects for the Desert Magazine building, the first substantial commercial building in the Palm Desert area. The building contract was awarded to the R. P. Shea Company of Indio at a cost of $216,000. The official opening took place on October 16 & 17, 1948. In the first years of the operation Randall worked 60 to 70 hours a week, as he found it difficult to delegate. Besides the magazine publication, a commercial printing operation called the Desert Press was also located in the building. All of their business was not local trade.

Cliff and Randall operated in two separate worlds. Without either the interest or the financial means to set up a post-war community, Randall devoted himself entirely to the publication of Desert Magazine. Cliff, on the other hand, envisioned a new community, was a natural in business matters, and had affluent friends to back his projects. Charles Shelton bought Desert Magazine in 1958, but kept Randall on staff for two years. In 1963 Shelton sold the subscription list to Jack and Carol Pepper, who moved the publishing plant to a small place on Larrea Street. Shelton kept the building and facilities to publish a new newspaper, a weekly called the Palm Desert Post. He hired Gene Conrotto as editor and publisher. James Harmon was general manager of the Palm Desert Publishing Company; and Desert Printers was owned by Jaffe & Jaffe.

On March 18, 1949 Randall remarried. Cyria was a talented sculptress who had worked professionally in the British Empire before her marriage. She encouraged Randall to write after his retirement, which resulted in two books: *On Desert Trails, Today and Yesterday* in 1961 (and) *Sun, Sand and Solitude* in 1968. He spent hours researching the next book and wrote the first two chapters of what became "Desert Editor", thanks to his friend, J. Wilson McKenney. Randall clearly intended the book to be more of a local history than an autobiography as his voluminous research indicated. Though death intervened in 1970 before the book was finished, we have this wonderful little volume .... The story of Randall Henderson and Palm Desert.

NEW MEMBERS

Supporting: Steve Lech

Individual: Joe Caruso
Scarlett Adams
Valerie El-Farrin
Betty Radovich

Family: Charlie & Judy Boone
Peg Donovan
Matt Monica
Hastings Family
Nora Ernst
Rath Family

MEMBERS WHO LIVE IN OUR MEMORY

Rheo Lawman was not only an active member of the Historical Society, she was an unforgettable personality with gorgeous red hair, who had the brains to match her beauty. Her most notable achievement was probably her work as the publisher and photographer for the popular local weekly, the Palm Desert Post newspaper. As one of our most auspicious pioneers, she dedicated over 50 years to community activities. She was on the Incorporation Committee in 1973, the first life member of the Historical Society, president of Soroptimist International, Woman's Division of the Chamber of Commerce, Joslyn Cove Senior Center, Desert Big Horn Sheep Society, Palm Desert Women's Club, Republican Women's Club, took part in the Riverside County Historic House survey in 1981-82, and won the Cliff Henderson Founder's Day award in 1997. Rheo will certainly be remembered by her friends in Palm Desert. The Society will gladly receive memorial donations in Rheo Lawman's name. Please make checks to: Historical Society of Palm Desert.

DONATIONS

Thanks to Bonnie Bowie, Rheo Lawman's niece, a large donation of archival material has been given to the Society. It includes 97 pieces for the paper archive and 21 photos -- 481 items in the total collection.

WANTED FOR AN EXHIBIT

Do you have any thimbles you would like to donate to the Historical Society? We would be happy to list your name on the display as a contributing member. Please call Anne at 346-6588 for details.

FOUNDER'S DAY RECIPIENT -- BIRGIT MOLLER

Biographical information from Joyce White

Birgit was born in a small city outside of Copenhagen, where she attended private school. Her first ambition was to become a famous artist specializing in ceramics, and later she thought about occupational therapy as a career. When she was 20 years old she married Poul Moller, and three months later they moved to Palm Desert, California. Even when the children were small, she found time to volunteer for Angel View Thrift Shop, the Children's Home Society, and was an active member of the Palm Desert Garden Club.

When they opened Moller's Garden Center on Painter's Path in Palm Desert, Birgit became a full-time "employee", straw boss, and assistant wherever needed. Karen and Erik Moller still own and operate the business. While working at the Garden Center she joined Soroptimist club. During recuperation from a broken leg, she decided to pursue her passion for young people and their needs. The C.O.D. Foundation Auxiliary made her a telephone committee-of-one, and from there she climbed the ladder to the presidency of the Board. Birgit initiated the annual "Getting to Know You" dinner/silent auction which has netted the Auxiliary thousands of dollars. Birgit Moller also has membership and volunteer time in the Desert Museum, Muses/Patronesses of the McCallum Theatre, the Historical Society, Boys & Girls Club, Shadow Mountain Palette Club; and she was named to the College of the Desert Alumni Hall of Fame as an Outstanding Community Leader. This energetic lady must be one of the most active citizens in Palm Desert. Congratulations, Birgit, you've earned our respect.

PALM AWARD RECIPIENTS

Donna Jean Darby - presenter: Jean Burns, College of the Desert Foundation
Frank Gaeta - presenter: Judy Tobin May, Big Brothers, Big Sisters of the Coachella Valley
Lori Sarner - presenter Robin Montgomery, Pegasus Riding Academy

VOLUNTEER / DOCENT COMMITTEE

Chairperson: Jean Ernst

Our October luncheon will honor our loyal volunteers. They can take credit for most of the successful programs of the Society, and we could not survive without them. When our fire house headquarters reopens on September 1st, we hope to see your name on our volunteer list. It is an invitation to step into the past history of Palm Desert, to appreciate those we call "pioneers", and to enjoy the comradery that is available to you on a daily basis. Please join our fun-loving group by calling 346-6588 and adding your name to our volunteer list.

MUSEUM SIGN

A new museum sign is needed for the front yard of Society headquarters. We hope to have it purchased and installed this summer. The estimated cost is $2,000. We would be very grateful for any donations which would help defray this expense. Please call Anne at 346-6588 for details. Thank you for your consideration.

BOARD OF DIRECTOR'S SUMMARY

Report by Dick Folkers, President

Our financial situation is improving as we add new members and receive renewals for existing members. A new computer program will keep better track of when members' fees are due. The Board will be reviewing various levels of membership along with benefits and privileges of each in the near future.

We have had an increasing number of visitors, and so more docents are needed. As it is, Anne Tuttle is not getting enough time to finish her administrative tasks because she is guiding visitors. Call the office to volunteer.

The fourth Fridays, January thru April 2008, will be used for the Desert Institute lecture series at Society headquarters. We had full houses for two events this year.

Founder's Day was very successful, and we are looking for a worthy recipient for 2008. If you would like to help, contact the Society office at 346-6588.

We hope to have the Society's website operational by this Fall. Jackie Damron has been working on this crucial public relations and information program.

Remember the 6th Annual Firehouse Yard Sale, scheduled for Sat. & Sun., Nov. 3 and 4. We will need helpers during the prior week to sort, price, clean and set up as well as during the weekend sale. Providing items from your house and soliciting things from friends and neighbors will be a big help -- spread the word!! Keep in mind that we do not want: shoes, clothing, computers/office equipment, used bed pillow/mattresses/bed frames. Donated items should be clean, workable and sellable.

Some of the Board and members have spent many hours helping Cathy Scott, Marian Henderson's daughter, arrange for a yard sale at the Clifford Henderson home on Pinyon Street. The Society netted $3000, half of the proceeds. Loyal volunteers are still sorting out significant historical items.

We will reopen the museum on Saturday, September 1 with a Wine & Cheese reception for members and those who would like to become members. It will be held at the museum from 3:00-5:00 p.m.

The Fall Luncheon will be in the main dining room of Marrakesh Country Club. The date is Wednesday October 24 with a social hour at 11 a.m. and luncheon at noon. The program is being planned as a recognition for volunteers, as well as an old-time fashion show.

A Cahuilla Hills Homesteader's Story by Esther Schaak

Through the windows of Cactus Shack, Maw saw Minnie Mannerly drive up the road, but she was to weak and ill to go to the door to greet her. Cactus was laying asphalt tile in the cabin, which was cold and drafty.

"Come in," called Maw when Minnie knocked. "Excuse me for not gittin' up, but I'm jist recoverin' from a bout with pneumony, and I ain't very ambitious."

"Oh, dear," pouted Minnie prettily, "I hope you're not too sick to help me with daughter's newspaper."

"Newspaper?" Maw came to attention like a hunting dog that scents his prey. "I'll be glad to help. What kin I do?"

"Write it," said Minnie simply, her pretty dimple made her request seem completely fair.

"She can't write without a typewriter," said Cactus.

"Oh, I have a typewriter at my house," said Minnie generously. "All you would have to do is come to my place and type it."

"This house is open and drafty," Cactus said. "Maybe it is a good idea for you to do something like that."

Maw went to Minnie's cottage in the gully. The front door led through the bedroom.

"Isn't my bed just wonderful?" said Minnie. "That mattress you gave me is the fourth one we've had, and we just pile them one on top of the other.

They went into the kitchen where dishes were piled in the sink, and three cats were standing around sniffing at the empty dishes. Occasionally one would languidly lick off a spot where dried food had stuck.

Maw sat down at the tiny old-fashioned typewriter and asked for news. "I don't know anything," said Minnie. "Maybe you should just make up something."

"All right," said Maw, eager to please. "Suppose you tell me something about how your neighbors got their houses built on their five acre claims, and I'll improvise from there."

It took a bit of pulling and prodding, but Maw was happy just for the chance to do something after her long stay in the hospital. In a few moments, Mr. mannerly came in. Maw felt uncomfortable when he didn't speak to her, but she decided that she had made a promise and would carry it out.

"Would you like to eat lunch?" asked Minnie fearfully. "I have some broccoli here, its pretty good."

"No, thanks," said Maw. "I never eat lunch."

Mr. Mannerly ate the broccoli from the pot and set it back on the stove. The largest cat jumped from the sink to the stove, where he bided his time. Evidently he knew from experience the exact moment when it became cool enough for him to handle. At that moment he leaned over the pot and ate whatever remained in it.

"I guess I'd better be going now," said Maw.

"Finished?" asked Minnie, her dimples showing prettily.

"I've done most of it," said Maw. "I'm sure you can finish. I must go home and try to wash my dirty windows."

"Do you think it's a disgrace for a southern lady and a college graduate to do housework?" asked Minnie archly.

"I don't think it's a disgrace to do anything decent and honest," said Maw.

"I do housework in the village," Minnie said coyly.

"Fine," said Maw. "Ef'n you want me to finish yore paper, I'll pay you whatever you git in the village to wash my windows and wax my floor."

"Promise me one thing," said Minnie, batting her eyes and smoothing the pretty wave in her soft brown hair, "promise you won't tell anyone about it."

"Of course, I won't tell anyone," said Maw. "Ef'n you want, I'll jest leave you my key and you kin do it when thar isn't a soul around. Would that help? Jest tell me how much time you spend, and I'll give you whatever you ask."

Maw finished the newspaper. It was agreed to have her key over the privy door.

The next week they returned. No housework. Maw was feeling better. She waxed the new tile proudly. Minnie appeared with her two children, Minette, age 13, and Dinny, aged eight. They had a ball. As Maw and Minnie talked, the children tossed the ball back and forth across the room.

"I just couldn't make it," said Minnie sweetly. "It's getting so close to Christmas and I'm so busy. Could you leave the windows go until after Christmas?"

"I think that will be all right," her head following the ball like the movies of a man watching a tennis match. "Here, children, would you like some candy?" she asked, hoping to distract them from their ball game. The children skillfully circled over to the dish of candy, but continued to bat the ball without missing a turn.

Minnie grinned proudly at her darlings and said in her sweet plaintive way, "Will you do something cute for our Christmas edition?" Minnie had all the newspaper lingo down pat, just like they do it on television.

"I g-g-guess so," said Maw. "I-I'll leave it at your mail box, huh?"

"Oh, thank you so much," Minnie's voice swelled with emotion. "Do you know what Mr. mannerly, oh dear, I mean Santa Claus is going to bring me for Christmas?"

"No, I can't imagine." Maw had opened the door, hoping the ball game would be transferred outdoors.

"A harp," breathed Minnie. "You know I'm a graduate of Mills College Music School." Minnie's smile was as ethereal as the pictured angels that play the harp.

Maw got out the Christmas edition .... and the New Year's edition. She had become strong enough to do all her own work -- all but the windows, which had become so smeared that it was hard to see through them.

In February Minnie drove up in the yard with her two children. This time they each had a yo-yo. Minnie explained what she wanted, while Maw's head worriedly watched the movement of the yo-yos. "Have some cake, children?" asked Maw. She put it on a plate with a fork, hoping to fool them out of their yo-yo game. They snatched the cake from the plates, throwing crumbs and forks on Maw's shining waxed floor.

"Oh, dear," laughed Minnie, "they are so hungry when they come home from school. They just don't act cultured at all, do they?"

Maw figgered she could get them out faster by promising to write the Valentine edition and depositing it in the mail box.

The next time they came with old film and matches. They announced that it made such a pretty flame.

"Not around here, it doesn't," said Maw hoarsely. "I'll write all your papers, and put them in the mail box," she said hastily.

They ceased to honk and wave when they passed Cactus Shack after that. About two weeks later, they appeared with the typewritten material that Maw had deposited in the mail box the day before. "We won't need this," said Minnie, "Mrs. Baker has written a series of histories for us."

"Fine," said Maw, "Jest keep it until you do. Now when will you wash the windows?"

"The igba atfa obsla," said Minette.
"Yeah," said little brother, "she's a igba atfa obsla, papa says."
"I don't wash windows," said Minnie haughtily. "I'm a governess for someone in the village."
"Well, ivega me my aperpa," said Maw, "and don't ask me to do it again."
"No more Maw Schack?" asked Minnie, realizing that her circulation was built on Maw.
"UH-uh, and goodbye," said Maw. Her tone was not friendly.
The three ran out the door, as Cactus' shrieks of laughter came from the back patio.
"Maw, it takes a lot to get you made, but when you do, I feel sorry for the people."
"Know something?" said Maw. "I haven't felt so good in months. I think I'll jest wash those windows myself."

PAST EVENTS

Jean Benson - was named "Citizen of the Year" by P.D. Rotarians at Desert Willow on March 19.
Ed Mullins Picnic in the Park - was one of our most enjoyable annual events, thanks to Doug Keedy, Barbara & Warren Eastes, and Carol Cole on March 25.
Spring Luncheon - Barbara Eastes & Joyce White researched 80 names of Pioneer Women from the 40s & 50s, at Palm Desert Country Club on April 18.
Hal Rover - received a Senior Award for service to his church, Catholic Charities, Friends of the Library, and the Historical Society, at Esmeralda Resort on April 13.
Keedy's Grill - celebrated it 50th anniversary, a City proclamation declared "Keedy's Day" on June 30.

UPCOMING EVENTS

July & August	Society Museum closed for the summer		
Sept. 1, Sat.	Museum reopens -- Wine and Cheese Party	Fire House	3-5 p.m.
Oct. 24, Wed.	Fall Luncheon - honors volunteers/fashion show	Marrakesh C.C.	11 a.m.
Oct. 28, Sun.	Golf Cart Parade	El Paseo	1 p.m.
Nov. 3 & 4, Sat./Sun.	Firehouse Yard Sale	Society	7:30a.m.-1:30p.m.
Nov. 11, Sun.	Veterans Day - Freedom Park dedication	Freedom Park	11 a.m.
Nov. 30, Fri.	Holiday Wreath Lighting/Ornament contest	Visitor's Center	5:30 p.m.

Have a great summer!! *Ginny Folkers, editor*

SAN BERNARDINO CA 924
06 JUL 2007 PM 3 T

Historical Society of Palm Desert
P. O. Box 77
Palm Desert, CA 92261

Hal and Angie Rover
45-657 Quailbrush
Palm Desert, CA 92260

92260+4946